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**THE MEDINA COUNTY ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION ASSOCIATION**  
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June 20, 2003

Ms. Jaya Zyman-Ponebshek  
U.R.S. Corporation  
P.O. Box 201088  
Austin, TX 78720-1088



Dear Ms. Zyman-Ponebshek,

As per our conversation on 12 June 2003, I am submitting comments on the environmental impacts the proposed Southwest Gulf Railroad (SGR) would have on the Quihi area of Medina County. These comments are submitted on behalf of the Medina County Environmental Association. Concerned citizens that attended the open house meeting in Hondo, Texas have already submitted similar or the same comments.

I believe you already have my correspondence of 30 April 2003 outlining some environmental problems. However, this letter will supplement that correspondence.

To properly address the environmental impact of this project for the present and the future, one should consider these factors.

- I. **Traffic and Flooding Problems on County and State Roads Due to Proposed Grade Level Crossings:** This proposed railroad, if constructed, will impact on a rapidly developing area of Medina County. Because of the proximity to San Antonio, Texas and its increasing population, this county of over 40,000 people is expected to grow at a 10% increase annually according to the County Commissioners' Court. This growth rate will likely continue for the next decade. The proposed railroad will cross five county roads and one state road in its 7.3- mile length. The county and state roads will also have to service an ever-increasing amount of traffic from gravel trucks as the development of the proposed quarry progresses. These county roads, not designed for heavy traffic, are narrow unpaved and paved roads that cross flood plains and flood at irregular intervals when 3 to 6 inches of rain occur. This happens frequently (3 times since 1997). A **grade level** crossing on County Road 4516 in the Cherry Creek flood plain is an especially serious problem because this is the primary road from Quihi to Castroville. This road is used for school buses, community EMS, police, and local fire department. A grade level crossing traversed by 4 miles of train cars each day, even if the crossing time was the estimated 3 minutes (which is doubtful), subjects people to unacceptable and unnecessary dangers and delays, which they currently do not experience. In addition, any berm or trestle built in the area near the railroad crossing on County Road 4516 would impound storm water that would disrupt traffic on this vital road for an indeterminate period of time and would damage the road surface and base, which would result in costly repairs to the county. Is Southwest Gulf Railroad going to

pay the repair bills?

- II. **Damage to Antiquities:** Quihi was founded in 1845 by Henry Castro who laid out the land and brought 10 families 9 miles northeast of Castroville to the natural "Quihi Lake" area. These settlers, according to history, were given extra land because the Quihi area was dangerous territory inhabited by hostile Indians who fought the settlers. Of necessity, these settlers built homes and subsequently schools, churches, and cemeteries along the flood plain of the Quihi Creek to be near water that comes from springs of the Artesian Zone of the Edwards Aquifer. A part of this region is the location of the railroad line at the junction of County Road 365. How is the railroad line going to cross the wetland region? Berms or trestles would impound water in the region of the flood plain above the crossing and imperil those in that area as well as those below the crossing if the berms or trestles gave way after heavy storm rains. Fifty historic homes, schools, churches, and cemeteries located in the area would be destroyed. Also, what impact will the vibration from multiple trains passing nearby every day, year after year, for 50 years have on fragile historic homes and buildings? The proposed life of the railroad servicing the quarry is 50 years.
- III. **Noise, Health, and Safety Issues:** Unlike residents of populated city areas that developed in close proximity to existing railroads, how can local residents that have enjoyed a quiet life breathing clean air exist with noise, vibration, and dust from 400 train cars per day passing their homes and blowing whistles as they approach grade level crossings every day and night?
- IV. **Loss of Income from Recreational Resources:** How will the owners of ranches be compensated for the loss of revenue from hunting leases for deer, turkey, dove, and quail which will no longer inhabit the area due to the noise and traffic from the trains? One rancher, among many, will lose at least \$4,000.00 every year.
- V. **Air Quality Issues:** Air quality should be ascertained for an adequate period prior to any railroad operation including the building and operation phase. What will be the cumulative effect on air quality along the line of the railroad?
- VI. **Social and Economic Issues:** In considering these factors, Southwest Gulf Railroad sought and obtained an endorsement from the Castroville Chamber of Commerce. The Castroville City Mayor is a friend of one of the quarry site owners and hunted on his ranch for 10 years. It should be noted that Castroville is 15 miles from the proposed quarry site and is 10 miles from the Union Pacific Rail Line that would connect to the proposed SGR Rail Line. Hence, Castroville would **not** be concerned with the above issues. On the other hand, SGR did **not** seek or obtain any endorsements from the residents who **will** be affected by the rail line and/or the quarry. The local residents of the Quihi area have united in their opposition and are represented by the Medina County Environmental Association. Since we first learned of the proposed project in January of 2000, we have diligently opposed this rail line for the above-mentioned factors and have sought the support of our local, state, and federal representatives. We have also submitted our concerns to U.S. Fish and Wildlife, U.S. Corps of Engineers, FEMA, Edwards Aquifer Authority, and Texas Commission on Environmental Quality. For three and a half years, we have held numerous town meetings and placed covenants on 9,650 acres of land stating that no railroad or conveyor belt system could be placed on our land. We have hired Adams

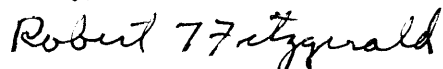
Environmental, Inc. to consult and advise us to oppose this proposed rail line. We have submitted a petition to the Surface Transportation Board to revoke their exemption. This is now being considered.

VII. We believe that Vulcan Materials Co. created the Southwest Gulf Railroad under the guise of hauling its product to the Gulf Coast, an area already serviced adequately by railroad with limestone quarried by Vulcan. However, we believe its main purpose is its hope to be granted a common carrier status so that it will have condemnation right granted under the power of eminent domain. In this regard, because the proposed route chosen by Vulcan is largely located in low lying areas and the flood plain, it is not likely that other shippers will chose to use the rail line. In addition, except for crossings, the great majority of the rail line will be isolated from existing roads and therefore will never be used for any additional industry. In our opinion, these factors should also be addressed in your environmental study so that the Surface Transportation Board can be aware of **all** concerns when approving or denying the permitting of this rail line.

VIII. Should a private company be allowed to change the economy of a region that is known for its farming and ranching and one that has great potential for creating tranquil rural homes for San Antonio and the surrounding area, to an area with an industrial economy whose questionable potential benefits are associated with great environmental disruptions, hazards, and irreversible changes? According to Vulcan Materials Co., they don't need this rail line and quarry to survive and make a profit. They already have reserves to continue operating for 100 years. Additionally, Vulcan has repeatedly stated that it won't open the quarry unless it has a rail line to ship its product, hence no additional gravel trucks on the roads.

We appreciate your consideration of this and other environmental aspects associated with this proposed rail line. We eagerly await the results of your environmental study, which we trust will appropriately address these issues brought before you and will allow the STB to have the appropriate insight in this drastic proposal. Please notify us of the next public hearing so that we may hear and comment on the results of your study.

Sincerely,



Robert Fitzgerald  
President, Medina County Environmental Association

cc: Rini Ghosh, Surface Transportation Board ✓  
U.S. Senator John Cornyn  
U.S. Representative Henry Bonilla  
Texas Senator Frank Madla  
Texas Representative Timeteo Garza  
Jim Barden, County Judge, Medina County  
Royce Hartman, Commissioner Pct. 1, Medina County  
Medina County Economic Development Committee  
Ed Fischer, Mayor City of Hondo  
Hondo Chamber of Commerce